The October Game

Ray Bradbury

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He put the gun back into the bureau drawer and shut the drawer.

No, not that way. Louise wouldn't suffer. It was very important that this thing have, above all duration. Duration through imagination. How to prolong the suffering? How, first of all, to bring it about? Well.

The man standing before the bedroom mirror carefully fitted his cuff-links together. He paused long enough to hear the children run by swiftly on the street below, outside this warm two-storey house, like so many grey mice the children, like so many leaves.

By the sound of the children you knew the calendar day. By their screams you knew what evening it was. You knew it was very late in the year. October. The last day of October, with white bone masks and cut pumpkins and the smell of dropped candle wax.

No. Things hadn't been right for some time. October didn't help any. If anything it made things worse. He adjusted his black bow-tie. If this were spring, he nodded slowly, quietly, emotionlessly, at his image in the mirror, then there might be a chance. But tonight all the world was burning down into ruin. There was no green spring, none of the freshness, none of the promise.

There was a soft running in the hall. That's Marion, he told himself. My'little one. All eight quiet years of her. Never a word. Just her luminous grey eyes and her wondering little mouth. His daughter had been in and out all evening, trying on various masks, asking him which was most terrifying, most horrible. They had both finally decided on the skeleton mask. It was 'just awful!' It would 'scare the beans' from people!

Again he caught the long look of thought and deliberation he gave himself in the mirror. He had never liked October. Ever since he first lay in the autumn leaves before his granmother's house many years ago and heard the wind and sway the empty trees. It has made him cry, without a reason. And a little of that sadness returned each year to him. It always went away with spring. But, it was different tonight. There was a feeling of autumn coming to last a million years. There would be no spring.

He had been crying quietly all evening. It did not show, not a vesitge of it, on his face. It was all hidden somewhere and it wouldn't stop.

The rich syrupy smell of sweets filled the bustling house. Louise had laid out apples in new skins of toffee; there were vast bowls of

punch fresh-mixed, stringed apples in each door, scooped, vented pumpkins peering triangularly from each cold window. There was a water tub in the centre of the living room, waiting, with a sack of apples nearby, for dunking to begin. All that was needed was the catalyst, the impouring of children, to start the apples bobbing, the srtinged apples to penduluming in the crowded doors, the sweets to vanish, the halls to echo with fright or delight, it was all the same.

Now, the house was silent with preparation. And just a little more than that.

Louise had managed to be in every other room save the room he was in today. It was her very fine way of intimating, Oh look Mich, see how busy I am! So busy that when you walk into a room I'm in there's always something I need to do in another room! Just see how I dash about!

For a while he had played a little game with her, a nasty childish game. When she was in the kitchen then he came to the kitchen saying, 'I need a glass of water.' After a moment, he standing, drinking water, she like a crystal witch over the caramel brew bubbling like a prehistoric mudpot on the stove, she said, 'Oh, I must light the pumpkins!' and she rushed to the living room to make the pumpkins smile with light. He came after, smiling, 'I must get my pipe.' 'Oh, the cider!' she had cried, running to the dining room. 'I'll check the cider,' he had said. But when he tried following she ran to the bathroom and locked the door.

He stood outside the bathroom door, laughing strangely and senselessly, his pipe gone cold in his mouth, and then, tired of the game, but stubborn, he waited another five minutes. There was not a sound from the bath. And lest she enjoy in any way knowing that he waited outside, irritated, he suddenly jerked about and walked upstairs, whistling merrily.

At the top of the stairs he had waited. Finally he had heard the bathroom door unlatch and she had come out and life below-stairs and resumed, as life in a jungle must resume once a terror has passed on away and the antelope return to their spring.

Now, as he finished his bow-tie and put his dark coat there was a mouse-rustle in the hall. Marion appeared in the door, all skeletons in her disguise.

'How do I look, Papa?'

'Fine!'

From under the mask, blonde hair showed. From the skull sockets small blue eyes smiled. He sighed. Marion and Louise, the two silent denouncers of his virility, his dark power. What alchemy had there been in Louise that took the dark of a dark man and bleached the dark brown eyes and black hair and washed and bleached the ingrown

baby all during the period before birth until the child was born, Marion, blonde, blue-eyed, ruddy-cheeked? Sometimes he suspected that Louise had conceived the child as an idea, completely asexual, an immaculate conception of contemptuous mind and cell. As a firm rebuke to him she had produced a child in her own image, and, to top it, she had somehow fixed the doctor so he shook his head and said, 'Sorry, Mr Wilder, your wife will never have another child. This is the last one.' 'And I wanted a boy,' Mich had said eight years ago.

He almost bent to take hold of Marion now, in her skull mask. He felt an inexplicable rush of pity for her, because she had never had a father's love, only the crushing, holding love of a loveless mother. But most of all he pitied himself, that somehow he had not made the most of a bad birth, enjoyed his daughter for herself, regardless of her not being dark and a son and like himself. Somewhere he had missed out. Other things being equal, he would have loved the child. But Louise hadn't wanted a child, anyway, in the first place. She had been frightened of the idea of birth. He had forced the child on her, and from that night, all through the year until the agony of the birth itself, Louise had lived in another part of the house. She had expected to die with the forced child. It had been very easy for Louise to hate this husband who so wanted a son that he gave his only wife over to the mortuary.

But – Louise had lived. And in truimph! Her eyes, the day he came to the hospital, were cold. I'm alive they said. And I have a blonde daughter! Just look! And when he had put out a hand to touch, the mother had turned away to conspire with her new pink daughter-child – away from that dark forcing murderer. It had all been so beautifully ironic. His selfishness deserved it.

But now it was October again. There had been other Octobers and when he thought of the long winter he had been filled with horror year after year to think of the endless months mortared into the house by an insane fall of snow, trapped with a woman and child, neither of whom loved him, for months on end. During the eight years there had been respites. In spring and summer you got out, walked, picknicked; these were desperate solutions to the desperate problem of a hated man.

But, in winter, the hikes and picnics and escapes fell away with leaves. Life, like a tree, stood empty, the fruit picked, the sap run to earth. Yes, you invited people in, but people were hard to get in winter with blizzards and all. Once he had been clever enough to save for a Florida trip. They had gone south. He had walked in the open.

But now, the eighth winter coming, he knew things were finally at an end. He simply could not wear this one through. There was an acid walled off in him that slowly had eaten through tissue and bone

over the years, and now, tonight, it would reach the wild explosive in him and all would be over!

There was a mad ringing of the bell below. In the hall, Louise went to see. Marion, without a word, ran down to greet the first arrivals. There were shouts and hilarity.

He walked to the top of the stairs.

Louise was below, taking cloaks. She was tall and slender and blonde to the point of whiteness, laughing down upon the new children.

He hesitated. What was all this? The years? The boredom of living? Where had it gone wrong? Certainly not with the birth of the child alone. But it had been a symbol of all their tensions, he imagined. His jealousies and his business failures and all the rotten rest of it. Why didn't he just turn, pack a suitcase, and leave? No. Not without hurting Louise as much as she had hurt him. It was simple as that. Divorce wouldn't hurt her at all. It would simply be an end to numb indecision. If he thought divorce would give her pleasure in any way he would stay married the rest of his life to her, for damned spite. No he must hurt her. Figure some way, perhaps, to take Marion away from her, legally. Yes. That was it. That would hurt most of all. To take Marion.

'Hello down there!' He descended the stairs beaming.

Louise didn't look up.

'Hi, Mr Wilder!'

The children shouted, waved, as he came down.

By ten o'clock the doorbell had stopped ringing, the apples were bitten from stringed doors, the pink faces were wiped dry from the apple bobbling, napkins were smeared with toffee and punch, and he, the husband, with pleasant efficiency had taken over. He took the party right out of Louise's hands. He ran about talking to the twenty children and the twelve parents who had come and were happy with the special spiked cider he had fixed them. He supervised pin the tail on the donkey, spin the bottle, musical chairs, and all the rest, amid fits of shouting laughter. Then, in the triangular-eyed pumpkin shine, all house lights out, he cried, 'Hush! Follow me!' tiptoeing towards the cellar.

The parents, on the outer periphery of the costumed riot, commented to each other, nodding at the clever husband, speaking to the lucky wife. How well he got on with children, they said.

The children, crowded after the husband, squealing.

'The cellar!' he cried. 'The tomb of the witch!'

More squealing. He made a mock shiver. 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here!'

The parents chuckled.

One by one the children slid down a slide which Mich had fixed up from lengths of table-section, into the dark cellar. He hissed and shouted ghastly utterances after them. A wonderful wailing filled dark pumpkin-lighted house. Everybody talked at once. Everybody but Marion. She had gone through all the party with a minimum of sound or talk; it was all inside her, all the excitement and joy. What a little troll, he thought. With a shut mouth and shiny eyes she had watched her own party, like so many serpentines thrown before her.

Now, the parents. With laughing reluctance they slid down the short incline, uproarious, while little Marion stood by, always wanting to see it all, to be last. Louise went down without help. He moved to aid her, but she was gone even before he bent.

The upper house was empty and silent in the candle-shine. Marion stood by the slide. 'Here we go,' he said, and picked her up.

They sat in a vast circle in the cellar. Warmth came from the distant bulk of the furnace. The chairs stood in a long line along each wall, twenty squealing children, twelve rustling relatives, alternatively spaced, with Louise down at the far end, Mich up at this end, near the stairs. He peered but saw nothing. They had all grouped to their chairs, catch-as-you-can in the blackness. The entire programme from here on was to be enacted in the dark, he as Mr Interlocutor. There was a child scampering, a smell of damp cement, and the sound of the wind out in the October stars.

'Now!' cried the husband in the dark cellar. 'Quiet!'

Everybody settled.

The room was black black. Not a light, not a shine, not a glint of an eye.

A scraping of crockery, a metal rattle.

'The witch is dead,' intoned the husband.

'Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee,' said the children.

'The witch is dead, she has been killed, and here is the knife she was killed with.' He handed over the knife. It was passed from hand to hand, down and around the circle, with chuckles and little odd cries and comments from the adults.

'The witch is dead, and this is her head,' whispered the husband, and handed an item to the nearest person.

'Oh, I know how this game is played,' some child cried, happily, in the dark. 'He gets some old chicken innards from the icebox and hands them around and says, These are her innards! And he makes a clay head and passes it for her head, and passes a soup bone for her arm. And he takes a marble and says, This is her eye! And he takes some corn and says, This is her teeth! And he takes a sack of plum pudding and gives that and says, This is her stomach! I know how this is played!'

'Hush, you'll spoil everything,' some girl said.

'The witch came to harm, and this is her arm,' said Mich.

'Eeeeeeeeeee!'

The items were passed and passed, like hot potatoes, around the cirle. Some children screamed, wouldn't touch them. Some ran from their chairs to stand in the centre of the cellar until the grisly items had passed.

'Aw, it's only chicken insides,' scoffed a boy. 'Come back, Helen!'

Shot from hand to hand, with small scream after scream, the items went down, down, to be followed by another and another.

'The witch cut apart, and this is her heart,' said the husband.

Six or seven items moving at once through the laughing, trembling dark.

Louise spoke up. ' Marion, don't be afraid; it's only play.

Marion didn't say anything.

' Marion?, asked Louise. 'Are you afraid?'

Marion didn't speak.

'She's all right,' said the husband. 'She's not afraid.'

On and on the passing, the screams, the hilarity.

The autumn wind sighed about the house. And he, the husband stood at the head of the dark cellar, intoning the words, handing out the items.

' Marion?' asked Louise again, from far across the cellar.

Everybody was talking.

' Marion?' called Louise.

Everybody quieted.

' Marion, answer me, are you afraid?'

Marion didn't answer.

The husband stood there, at the bottom of the cellar steps.

Louise called ' Marion, are you there?'

No answer. The room was silent.

'Where's Marion?' called Louise.

'She was here', said a boy.

'Maybe she's upstairs.'

' Marion!'

No answer. It was quiet.

Louise cried out, 'Marion, Marion!'

'Turn on the lights,' said one of the adults.

The items stopped passing. The children and adults sat with the witch's items in their hands.

'No.' Louise gasped. There was a scraping of her chair, wildly, in the dark. 'No. Don't turn on the lights, oh, God, God, God, don't turn them on, please, don't turn on the lights, don't!.Louise was shrieking now. The entire cellar froze with the scream.

Nobody moved.

Everyone sat in the dark cellar, suspended in the suddenly frozen task of this October game; the wind blew outside, banging the house, the smell of pumpkins and apples filled the room with the smell of the objects in their fingers while one boy cried, 'I'll go upstairs and look!' and he ran upstairs hopefully and out around the house, four times around the house, calling, 'Marion, Marion, Marion!' over and over and at last coming slowly down the stairs into the waiting breathing cellar and saying to the darkenss, 'I can't find her.'

Then... some idiot turned on the lights.